

## Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Annie C. Pratt, October 13, 1900, with transcript

Copy. ON THE IRISH SEA. S. S. Campania. October 13, 1900. Dear Mrs. Pratt:

I continue reply to your kind note of October 5th. Glad to know of your finds relating to Cogswell and so forth. They are specially timely as Chapter VII will relate to the Hartford school.

The last part of your letter relating to Mrs. Chamberlain's plan for Hellen Keller and Miss Sullivan came to me as a sort of shock and I hardly know what to say about it.

I like to think of Helen fighting her way through Radcliff College in competition with hearing and seeing young ladies, and then startling the world as a great authoress or even poetess. With her gifts of mind and imagination there should be a great future open to her in literature, and I believe that as an authoress, she would not only move the world, but make for herself all the money that might be necessary to keep her in comfort all her life and give her the means to do any good she chose. But for Helen to become joint superintendent of a special school for Deaf and Blind children would be a "comedown" indeed. So far as Helen is concerned, I should like to see her take her proper place among hearing and seeing people. She can, if she chooses, associate with the best minds of the 2 world upon equal terms. I have no hesitation in saying that the proposed joint superintendency would NOT be the best thing for Helen herself. Whatever should be her sphere of usefulness, she would always be interested in the deaf and the blind— her sympathies would naturally go out to those who have been afflicted like herself, and I am sure she could do a great deal more to aid them indirectly than directly.

With Miss Sullivan, of course, it is different. It would be a great thing if she could be placed in a position to impress her ideas upon other teachers,—not simply teachers of the

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deaf-blind, but teachers of the deaf generally, and I would be glad to see some scheme elaborated that would lead to this result.

I have spoken above from the point of view of Helen Keller herself and Miss Sullivan. But I must say that from the point of view of the deaf-blind themselves, I do not think that a special school for their benefit would be the best thing. From my point of view, the larger and more comprehensive the school, the worse it would be, and the proposal to admit pupils from foreign countries, worst of all. The whole plan is opposed to what seem to me fundamental principles in dealing with the unfortunate and defective. It should be recognized as a fundamental thing, that the collection of defective children exclusively together, is a thing to be avoided as much as possible. Exclusive association with one another only aggregates and intensifies the peculiarities that differentiate them from other people, whereas, it is our object, by instruction, to do away with these differences, to the greatest possible extent. I should think it would almost make a sane man mad to be shut up exclusively with the insane, and it certainly would be much better for the insane if they could be surrounded by healthy minds. It is simply a question of practicability, expense, etc. The blind become blinder by exclusive association with one another, and the deaf and dumb are made into a class apart by themselves. Now, the creation of a special school for those who are both blind and deaf is, in my opinion, a thing to be avoided, if possible. I could write a great deal upon this subject, but this is neither the time nor the place. My heart is deeply moved in the matter because I feel that a gigantic blunder is about to be made and I am away and cannot prevent it. Let me, however, say a few words as to what I think should be done, rather than what should not be done.

Believing, as I do, in the policy of decentralization, in dealing with the defective children—the policy of separating them from one another as much as practicable during the process of education—and keeping them in constant personal contact with their friends and relatives and ordinary normal people,—I would say that it would be better to send the teachers to these children, rather than send the children to the teachers. It would be better to associate together the people who 4 wish to benefit these children , than to being

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the children themselves together. I would like to see the ideas of Mrs. Chamberlain take the form of an organized association to promote the education of deaf-blind children. I would have this association provide funds that would enable Miss Sullivan to qualify others to become teachers of the deaf-blind and then send these teachers to the deaf-blind children in their own homes and among their own people, as Miss Sullivan herself was sent to Helen. It should be the duty of these teachers to instruct—not simply the deaf-blind children themselves—but their parents and relatives and friends. They should teach the people at home, so that through their agency, the children would have in effect many teachers in their own homes.

I can't go on elaborating thus in the dining room of a trans-atlantic steamer, but I cannot allow your letter to pass unanswered, lest you should think that I approve of a plan that seems to me to be a great mistake.

Just one point in conclusion. So much individual instruction and care is required that the instruction of a deaf-blind child will necessarily be expensive. Each child will necessarily require a teacher to himself. Now, looked at simply from the point of view of expense. Suppose we have a special school. We must provide the buildings and grounds; we must board the pupils and teachers. The money necessary for these things is over and above what is necessary for the education of the children. If we send the teachers to the children, we have only to provide the teachers, salaries of the instructors, for the parents would provide board and lodging for the teacher and pupil, and the expense of school buildings would be saved.

From the point of economy, as well as efficiency, I would say that the money provided should be expended, as much as possible, in the salaries of teachers, (exclusive of board) and as little as possible upon board and lodging and buildings.

Send the teachers to the children, not the children to the teachers.

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Yours sincerely, Alexander Graham Bell. Dear Mrs. Pratt: We shall be in London tomorrow and find all there we hope. Much love to you. Gilbert H. Grosvenor.